

TO: Planning Board
FROM: CDD Staff
DATE: February 8, 2005
RE: Lower Mass Ave – Potential Zoning Modifications – Part 2

During the public meetings held by the Community Development Department, community members expressed concern that large-scale housing or institutional uses might displace pedestrian-friendly, neighborhood-oriented uses such as retail stores, restaurants, and small consumer-service offices. The staff has been considering ways to require or encourage active ground-floor uses, such as retail, to be included in new development in the commercially-zoned portion of the Lower Mass Ave corridor.

On the following two pages, we provide an overview of some of the existing standards and regulations of the Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District that are indented to promote an active, pedestrian-friendly streetscape, and then we describe a set of options for modifying those standards and regulations in order to more strongly encourage active ground-floor uses such as retail and the like.

These options are presented for the Board's consideration and discussion.

Existing Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District Regulations

The Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District (defined in section 20.100 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance) is a zoning overlay that covers most of the Mass Ave corridor north of the Cambridge Common. The following summarizes the regulations in that overlay that are intended to promote an active, pedestrian-friendly streetscape along the avenue.

existing use requirements: The ground-floor portion of a building facing Mass Ave, to a depth of at least 20 feet into the building, must contain “active uses,” which may include residential, institutional, office, or retail, but specifically excludes parking.

existing design standards:

Standards applied to all development (with or without ground-floor retail/office uses): (a) areas between a building’s lot line and the Mass Ave sidewalk must be landscaped or paved for pedestrian use (i.e., no parking lots are allowed in front of buildings); (b) the ground floor can be no higher than 4 feet above grade; (c) principal entrances must face Mass Ave; (d) at least 25% of the total area of facades facing Mass Ave must be comprised of clear glass.

Standards applied to ground floor retail/office uses only: (a) each separately leased space must have a separate entrance facing Mass Ave; (b) the ground floor must be at grade; (c) at least 50% of the ground-floor area of facades must be comprised of clear glass.

Note: The Planning Board may issue a special permit to waive these use and design regulations if it decides that a particular project would better serve the objectives of the overlay district without adhering to the stated regulations.

existing design review: All projects with at least 6,000 square feet of new construction must undergo a design consultation with city staff, to which abutters and interested neighbors are also invited. This consultation is purely advisory. *Note: The staff is recommending that the threshold be lowered from 6,000 to 2,000 square feet.*

Additional Zoning Options to Encourage Ground-Floor Activity

Note: These suggestions are intended to apply only within the BC district around Porter Square and the BA-2 district to the south, but could be expanded to other parts of the Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District (which would first require further discussion with community members along other sections of Mass Ave).

A. Changing the use requirements to require desired ground-floor uses

Instead of allowing any type of residential, institutional, office, or retail uses on the ground floor, the regulations could allow only certain types of retail, office, or institutional uses that are more “consumer-oriented”. These uses might include retail stores, restaurants, dry cleaners and laundries, banks, doctors’ and lawyers’ offices, community centers, galleries and museums, recreational facilities, and the like. Additionally, the required depth of “active ground floor uses” could be increased from 20 feet to 40 feet, to more accurately reflect the typical minimum size of a retail space.

B. Expanding the applicability of existing design standards

The Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District currently includes design standards that apply only to ground-floor commercial uses (see description on reverse page). It might be possible to modify these standards so that they apply to all uses in the corridor. This would encourage the development of pedestrian-friendly ground-floor spaces, but give property owners some flexibility in how the spaces are used. For residential development, the standards might apply only to some minimum percentage of the street frontage.

C. Providing FAR incentives for desired ground-floor uses

For new residential buildings, floor area dedicated to non-residential uses on the ground floor facing Mass Ave, up to a depth of 40 feet, could be exempted from the FAR calculation for the building. As a result, a housing developer, for example, could include an active ground-floor use without reducing the amount of residential floor area that can be built. For non-residential buildings, the same exemption could apply specifically to retail uses, to encourage retail at the ground floor of office or institutional buildings.

A different approach, intended to have a similar effect, would be to allow ground-floor retail uses at the same FAR as residential uses, which are currently allowed at a higher FAR than non-residential uses in the BA-2 (where the allowed FAR is 1.75 for residential and 1.00 for non-residential) and BC (where the allowed FAR is 2.00 for residential and 1.25 for non-residential) districts. This would ensure that a housing-above-retail building can be built at the same allowed FAR as a building that is all housing.

While this type of mechanism could be provided as an incentive alone, it might also be paired with the regulations suggested in option (A) or (B), to provide an allowance that would help to offset the additional use or design restrictions.